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ABSTRACT

Three premises are basic to Writing Across the Curriculum: (1) when learning involves writing, more learning is achieved; (2) learning to write involves learning to manage and coordinate the component skills of writing within real writing tasks; and (3) through writing, students can learn how to actively touch the content of a class. The role of teachers who accept these premises is to teach other instructors what Writing Across the Curriculum is and can do to help improve students' growth in other fields. Emphasis must be placed on the need for more writing, different kinds of writing, and a different view of what teaching writing is. Implementing a Writing Across the Curriculum program begins with the preparation of a clear explicit statement of the rationale for and goals of the program. Next, administrative and faculty support is enlisted, and faculty involvement is developed through workshops and individual contact to help in the planning and design of writing assignments. The workshop sessions may focus on topics such as note-taking, class logs, study guides, writing assignments, essay tests, and conference evaluations. By recruiting instructors who will participate with energy and commitment, the future of the Writing Across the Curriculum program will be assured. (LAL)

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WRITING FOR LEARNING:

Starting a Writing Across the Curriculum Program in the Community College

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As teachers of writing, we "know" that writing is absolutely, unquestionably essential to learning. Our "knowing" that, however, has not been particularly helpful to students. Many of them don't know how to write and aren't learning how to. We may believe that without writing all other learning suffers or at least is only minimally achieved, but until we can get our point across and our approach more widely adopted, we haven't done much.

Our most basic assumption in WAC efforts is that students need the skills that writing requires and those that are more fully developed through writing. We don't see writing as some sort of passing fad in instructional plans; we believe it is fundamental to the process of teaching anything. What we have learned about the writing process has shown us that writing is a thinking process, and without it, some kinds of learning do not--can not--take place. Brannon, Knight, and Neverow-Turk in their Writers Writing say it well in describing the theory that underlies their book:

> Writing is not the display of what a writer has already learned; rather, it is the verbal manifestation of the writer's capacity to learn by making connections in diverse experience. Writing is a way of knowing, of learning more and more about a subject. Knowing is not something a writer starts out with, and it's not a static body of information that a person acquires. Knowing is an activity and writing is one representation of this activity. Writing is the discovering and shaping of thought in language; the writer's use of language represents the connections she has made, the active relating of one bit of information to another.

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Bechtel, in Improving Writing and Learning: A Handbook for Teachers in Every Class, makes the same point but with a more pragmatic approach:

> Similarities between writing learning are quite striking. Both are active processes which utilize the whole brain, integrating sensory perceptions, experience, and memory on several levels simultaneously.
>
> People who . . . write well have the means of discovering knowledge and of knowing that they know--powerful advantages in an era when information becomes obsolete rapidly and career changes are regularly expected.
>
> Writing skills are important for employability and promotion. The same skills also help synthesize observations, organize personality, and establish a constructive self-concept. In short, writing is central to the fullest attainment of human potential.

These assumptions, then, lead to the premises I see as basic to Writing Across the Curriculum:

1. When learning involves writing, more learning is achieved.
2. Learning to write goes beyond learning the component skills of grammar, punctuation, spelling, organization and paragraphing. It involves learning to manage and coordinate these skills within real writing tasks.
3. Through writing, students can learn how to actively touch the content of a course--to classify it, to rearrange it, to manipulate it, and develop a personal relationship to it--thereby becoming more active learners and learning more.

The role of teachers who believe these premises becomes one of sharing the idea, of teaching other teachers what Writing Across the Curriculum is and suggesting what it can do. I believe the best and the most salable approach involves demonstrating its benefits both for students and for instructors. We can't ask teachers in other disciplines to assign writing and to encourage good writing for the sake of the English teacher or even because it builds general skills, but we can show them that doing so improves their students' growth in their own fields.

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It's not difficult to find consensus on the gravity of the problem; most instructors agree that students can't write decently. For the most part, these teachers will agree that without some change, certain situations will continue:

1. Students will choose classes with little or no written work.
2. Faculty will feel pressured to give up writing demands.
3. We all will continue to graduate students whose writing embarrasses us. Worse yet, we will go on implying to these students that they are competent in basic literacy skills, when we know they're not!

The task, again, is teaching other teachers what Writing Across the Curriculum means and to help them devise funtional ways to use it in their classroom to improve student learning. Basically, this implies:

The Need for More Writing. Students who write only in their English classes perceive writing as a narrow skill, one that is not too useful. Their goal becomes getting through the course and getting beyond any demands for writing. The truth is that many students won't survive in college unless they receive more instruction in writing and more practice and reinforcement of writing skills than Freshman English Composition classes can provide. And if they don't learn to use writing for studying and learning, they may find they can't learn enough to be successful students.

The Need for Different Kinds of Writing. The dominant view of language in schools, according to Freisinger, has become its function of informing, which implies that the only language activity useful to education is the finished report or essay. This is the sort Britton labeled the "transactional" and Emig called "extensive," the outer directed mode of writing. In many cases, students have done only classificatory writing, the kind that simply reflects information given in books or in teachers' lectures. They possess what Freedman calls a "diminished, impoverished conception of writing," due to this limited experience in form, purpose, and audience.

Instead, writing for learning requires "expressive" writing, writing that allows the students to concentrate on ideas, to think on paper. It's the often described "How do I know what I think until I see what I say," situation, the automatic reaching for a pencil that so many of us do when we say, "Let me think about it." It's working out connections, becoming aware of how things fit, identifying what we think and know. This kind of writing involves forming one's own ideas, not transcribing fully formed concepts from other sources. We have to make it clear to our colleagues that when we use writing only to test--especially when students only give back information--we are not developing independent thinkers. We are simply making their students containers of the teacher's ideas. How can we expect their students to be able to think imaginatively and independently--or consider it important--if we don't ask them to practice it?

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The Need for a Different View of What Teaching Writing Is. Teachers in other disciplines don't have to become grammar teachers--the movement is definitely not "grammar across the curriculum." This notion is one of the greatest problems to overcome in successfully encouraging many teachers to incorporate writing into their courses. Many instructors outside the English department feel inadequate or at least uncomfortable about evaluating student writing, thinking they need to be able to expertly analyze and correct mechanical errors. Often, it takes a good deal of discussion to convince them that Writing Across the Curriculum, as Maimon put it, doesn't mean that the social scientists are responsible for teaching semicolons and that philosophy instructors are in charge of subordinate clauses. That, I tell them, is my job as an English teacher. Teachers in other disciplines need to know that they need not--should not--evaluate writing in terms of its surface features. They should look at meaning, at clarity, and what the writer has said and what ideas he has chosen to frame or support his thought. English teachers will speak to the student about style and technique and, of course, about correctness. Sometimes it takes a good deal of talking and perhaps some group experience in evaluating writing, but most teachers will recognize that they have an intuitive skill for knowing good writing. They are, after all, much more knowledgeable than English teachers about writing in their own disciplines; they know how historians or mathematicians write for other historians and mathematicians. We don't.

How then, do we start? We make a clear, explicit statement that presents our argument for a writing program and says precisely what we mean to do. Then, we gather administrative support on a theoretical level (that's easy, there's a wealth of very credible information to support the value of teaching writing) and on a practical level (that's harder, except that some good Writing Across the Curriculum programs have shown that a very small financial reward suggests to teachers that their efforts are recognized). Then we enlist faculty, beginning with those who have or will make the time, people who haven't reached a cynical stage about student writing or their own work, people who are movers and leaders among their colleagues. Their support for the idea gives it the credibility and the steadiness it needs.

We make all faculty involvement voluntary, never making the slightest implication that using writing is content area courses is "expected." And we offer--easily, and without fuss and fanfare--help in overcoming the greatest problems faculty members bring to the effort--ways to deal with matters of time and felt lack of expertise. In other words, before participants can start to worry about how adding writing to their courses will affect their already crowded syllabus, we show them how writing needn't replace anything they consider vital. And we handle the biggest block of all by showing them ways to evaluate writing that they can easily handle--after convincing them that they really don't need to "correct" everything their students write. Some of that writing they need never lay their eyes on!

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What I'm saying is that we involve faculty and then, through workshops and individual contact, we help them plan and design writing assignments. We bring them together to share the successes and admit the other attempts; we continue to encourage them to experiment and take risks, to try whatever they think might work; and we always emphasize the value of what they are doing for their students. We make records of their efforts by gathering examples and compiling materials, so that over time, we can document what we and they learn. When we ask faculty to briefly report on their projects, we not only emphasize the importance of their participation, we also let them experience the problems and the rewards of writing. In addition, we cement their expectations of continuing the effort by focusing on revising their writing assignments, leading to their perceptions of writing as an on-going part of their course.

How do we get a writing effort started? We get faculty, and we sell them, we show them, and we make it worth their while. We talk about the need to get students involved:

about overcoming passivity,
about reorienting the externally controlled,
about changing expectations that they are there to be "taught,"

We convince teachers that writing--in and outside of class--will help their students learn more by improving understanding, concentration, and remembering; learn better, the imprint is deeper and more permanent; and learn differently, as they learn to work at more abstract levels, generalizing, making inferences, synthesizing, thinking.

We suggest writing will stimulate students' sense of responsibility for learning and they develop the skills and the strategies that will help give them control over their learning, give them the ability to consciously direct their own learning.

And we make the point that students who are able to sense their own progress and growth, see gains in their own abilities to achieve, are more likely to persist, to stay in school.

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We show teachers how they can use writing in their classes, that writing skills for learning go way beyond doing the classic college "term paper." We demonstrate and give workshop sessions on such skills as:

Note-taking. We talk to faculty about what happens in class. Can students write notes that are useful, that help them learn, that help them study for tests? Are they able to process the information their teachers present in class, to sort out the most important points so they know what to learn, to relate the main ideas so they can see the content as an integrated, connected whole? Can they relate supporting ideas to main ideas so they understand the how and why of topics?

Or do we need to present them with a basic, easy-to-learn, discipline adaptable notetaking system. Doing so takes no more than one class period or it can be done outside of class through the writing lab or learning center. Then students can practice this writing-for-learning activity in every course they take.

Class Logs. We ask whether students are active participants in the classroom or practice uninvolved passivity. Do they interact with the ideas and with each other? Do they ask the kinds of questions that help them learn more? Do they ask the kinds of questions that let instructors know what they don't understand? Can they integrate their learning?

If not, teachers might initiate the use of the interactive learning log, a new approach to writing-for-learning that combines the best of the traditional journal and the information processing notetaking system. Students practice writing notes, but then go beyond recording and personally respond to and interact with the material. They learn what it is, what it means, and how it fits into or with their existing knowledge. Logs encourage fluency, actively involve students, pattern and support thinking/learning operations, adapt to any course content, provide immediate classroom emphasis and response, become ready-made review and study tools, and require little, if any, grading.

Study Guides. How do students direct their own learning, handle their text assignments? Can they process print, summarize important information, choose what to emphasize, study, or learn? Or do instructors need to use study guides to pattern the kinds of thinking students need to practice by providing writing assignments that cue student responses?

Study guides can help students interact with texts, examine their own assumptions, make inferences, recognize and understand and internalize concepts instead of memorizing facts. Study guides can provide the direction and the practice students need to become independent learners.

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Writing assignments. Many faculty believe writing assignments are important, that they help students to learn, but they are nevertheless reluctant to make such assignments because they don't feel they can carry it off successfully--they think they don't know how to coach writing or evaluate it. We need to introduce them to the microtheme, an incredibly useful writing tool for in-class work and outside assignments that patterns particular discipline-specific writing skills. The microtheme is not time-consuming, and it can be evaluated quickly and in a number of ways--as groups, by peers, or a simple scanning by the teacher.

These short (a 5 X 7 card will do it) nuggets of writing give students a chance to practice specific skills without giving them a major project. They are encouraging rather than discouraging; they seem possible--even easy--rather than frightening; in other words, they enable rather than block. And they are extremely flexible--easy to design and describe, they can be used in any situation.

Essay tests. Do students know how to create expectations of success in their reader, or themselves? Can they accurately analyze the demands of essay tests--read the verbs and know what to do? Do they understand the importance of the first impression, can they design a dazzling beginning that will set up their response? Then they need to know how to develop their main points, integrating their supporting data in a way that lets them show what they know in the most advantageous manner. They need to understand how essential it is to provide a satisfactory conclusion, reinforcing the impression that they have answered the question knowledgeably and completely.

An instructor who uses essay tests knows that they can become learning situations in themselves, not just measuring learning but sponsoring it. Students learn to prepare differently, and they become better learners as well as better writers because of the experience. Good essay test writing is a special kind of sub-skill, that like note-taking, can be presented in or outside of class in a single session and then practiced throughout the course.

Conference evaluations. The opportunity to talk to students about course content through the vehicle of evaluating their writing is a valuable opportunity for instructors. The two- or five-minute conference, focusing on a single point of content, doesn't take a lot of time, doesn't overwhelm the student with more information than he can cope with, and does let both teacher and students concentrate on one goal at a time, demonstrating that writing, learning really, is a step by step process. This method makes the task manageable for all concerned, and because the instructor defines the steps and the order, he or she has control over how the students learn the process. The problem of coaching writing becomes simplified, and both teacher and student gain confidence.

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After we sell them, then show them a few of the kinds of writing uses, approaches, and strategies that teachers can devise and develop, we then need to bond our programs by making it worth their while. If we do our recruiting well, if we get the people who can and will participate with energy and commitment, the rest is assured. We shouldn't have to struggle to maintain the funding if positive outcomes are documented; we won't have to continue to persuade faculty to use writing once they understand its value and feel confident to use it. In other words, we have a product the community needs. If we can get it well begun, we'll have lots of help in keeping it going. If we're lucky, if we can keep up our enthusiasm, it will roll on its own. Imagine a day when no one can remember when students didn't walk into class and get ready to write!

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